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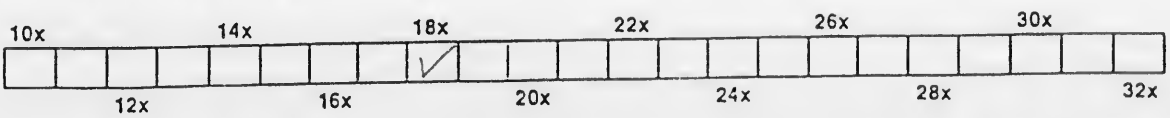

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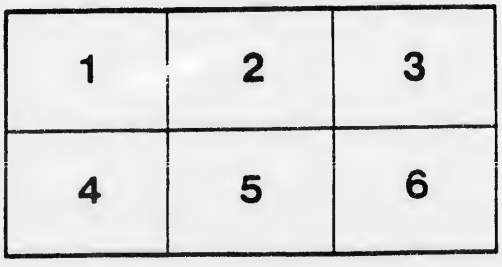

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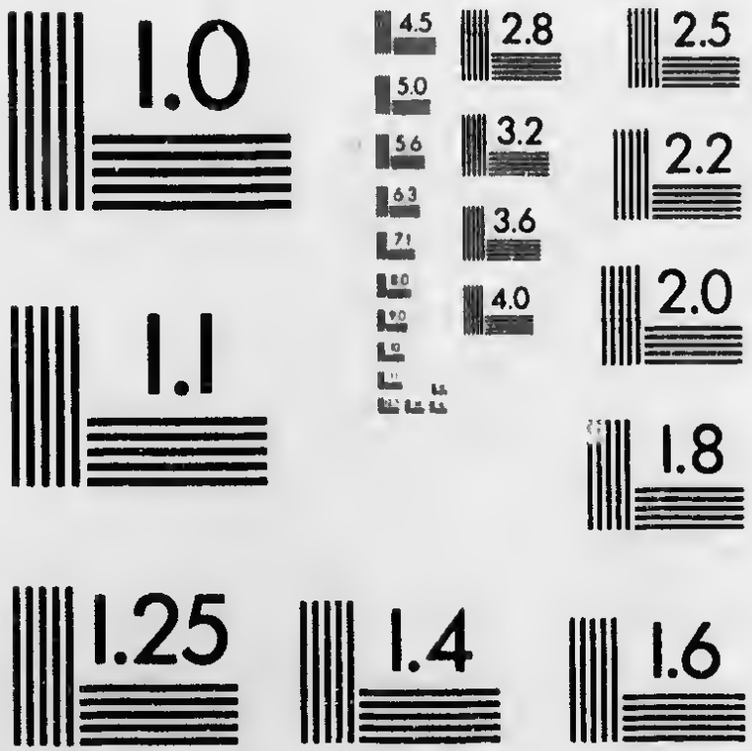

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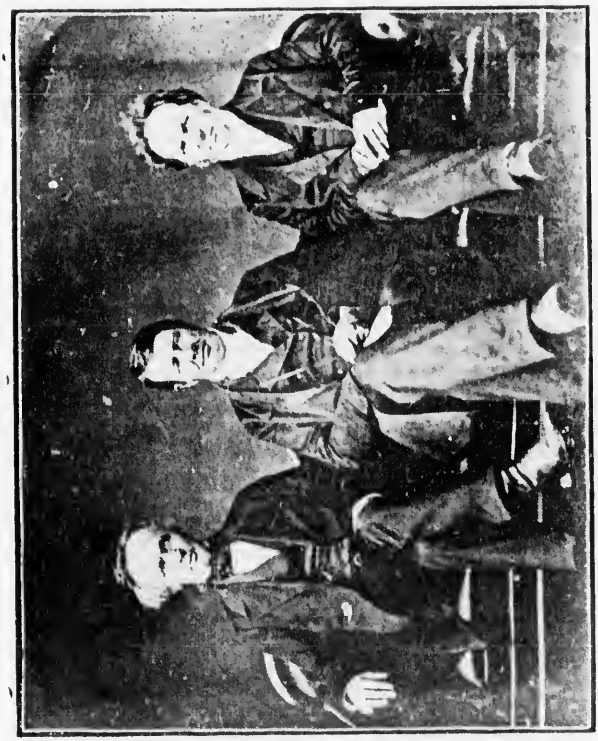

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The Ryerson Brothers

By J. George Hodgins, LL.D.

My personal knowledge of, and esteem for, the Rev. John Ryerson and each of his four gifted brothers, whom I knew (George, William, Egerton, and Edwy), induces me to say a few words, particularly in regard to the former. Each of the brothers was noted for something special. They were, as men and ministers, very different from one another in their mental constitution and habits of thought. George was well educated, and was afterwards master of the London District Grammar School, and Egerton was his usher. William, whom I often heard preach, was an impassioned and natural orator; and Edwy was sharp and incisive in his preaching, and was somewhat satirical in his style and manner, but kind-hearted and playful.

It is true that the unobtrusive life of Mrs. John Ryerson did not bring her into any prominence, but it is no less true that the quiet dignity of her manner, her prudent counsels and wifely wisdom exercised a happy influence upon her husband. My personal acquaintance with the Rev. John Ryerson dates back many years—to 1828. He was then in the prime of life, and had before that time rendered effective service in the cause of Methodist union, and in the establishment of the Upper Canada Academy, now Victoria University.

Although he was at that time chairman of a district, yet he was always known as (presiding) "Elder Ryerson," of Methodist Episcopal times. He was also always known as a safe and wise counsellor. And the Ryan schism, the Strachan controversy, and the hostile movements of the British Methodist missionaries in Upper Canada—which occurred during 1824-1832—called forth in him the highest and best of these qualities. As a solution of the latter difficulty, Rev. John Ryerson suggested and strongly urged the necessity of a union with the British Conference. His advice was followed; and the Rev. Egerton Ryerson, who had then won his spurs as Dr. Strachan's antagonist, and as Editor of The Christian Guardian, was deputed in 1833 (the year I came to Canada) to negotiate the union, which he successfully accomplished in that year.

This union only lasted seven years, and was dissolved in 1840. It was, however, renewed on a more lasting foundation seven years from that date—in 1847. Rev. John Ryerson was the principal negotiator of this latter union, to accomplish which he and the Rev. Anson Green were deputed to visit England in that year.

The causes which led to the disruption of the union in 1840 were partly financial and partly personal against Rev. Egerton Ryerson. Few only of the older Methodists of to-day will remember the memorable scene in the Canadian Conference of 1840, when so many of the ministers of that day separated themselves from each other, and into two bands—those who from early association and feeling adhered to the British Conference, and those who remained faithful to the Canadian Conference. This noted scene took place in the old Adelaide

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Street Church. I was present, and saw how greatly moved all the ministers were when they finally bade each other adieu. At the close of the Conference, Dr. Ryerson delivered a memorable speech in defence of his proceedings. As he closed, he referred to his disinterested labors for the church of his choice, and quoted with touching effect the following words from one of Wesley's hymns :

"No foot of land do I possess,
No cottage in the wilderness ;
A poor wayfaring man."

Political feeling had somewhat to do with the disruption. The rebellion of 1837-8 had its influence also, although not one of the Canadian Methodist leaders was implicated in that movement. The only one suspected and brought to trial was Dr. T. D. Morrison, a former mayor of Toronto ; but he was honorably acquitted. Indeed, some of the bitterest words uttered by Mr. W. L. Mackenzie were directed against Dr. Ryerson for his warning letters to the people of Upper Canada against carrying the banner of reform into the ranks of the disaffected. These letters, headed "Impressions," were written after Dr. Ryerson returned from his collecting tour for Upper Canada Academy in England in 1836. (While in Dublin in that year he was a guest of my father.) The "Impressions" were chiefly directed against the acts and treasonable utterances of Messrs. Hume and Roebuck, Mr. Mackenzie's allies in England and in the British House of Commons.

As an evidence of the kindly nature and sagacious foresight of Rev. John Ryerson—although a warm Conservative (or loyalist, as they were called in those days)—he was the spokesman of a deputation to Sir George Arthur to urge him

to remit the sentence of death passed upon Messrs. Lount and Mathews, for the part they took in the rebellion of 1837-8. But he pleaded in vain. The Rev. Charles (afterwards archdeacon) Brough was Mr. Ryerson's only colleague in that deputation.

No one familiar with the events to which I have referred, and who can recall the incidents of those memorable years, but must be aware of the fact that Dr. Ryerson, the recognized and avowed champion of civil and religious liberty in Upper Canada, was the central figure in the Methodist and other controversies of these days. Yet they will be no less aware of the fact that the unobtrusive and trusted counsellor of his brother Egerton was the Rev. John Ryerson. Every one recognized in him the faithful, wise, and judicious mentor of Dr. Ryerson in all of these controversies. In "The Story of My Life" I have given extracts from his numerous letters to his brother Egerton, all of which are eminently characteristic of these qualities of his mind. The readers of that book will find nearly one hundred references to Mr. Ryerson and to his letters.

It was a no less striking fact, and yet characteristic of these two men, that as they advanced in years the relation between them was reversed, and Dr. Ryerson became in turn the sympathetic friend and counsellor of his brother John. Nothing could exceed the touching nature of their intercourse in later years, when Rev. John Ryerson had retired from active labor as a minister. As an evidence of Dr. Ryerson's high appreciation of his brother, I may state that after his return from England in 1847, having with Dr. Green negotiated the union with the British Conference, Dr. Ryerson wrote a con-

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gratulatory letter to Drs. Bunting and Alder, in which he said: "Your treatment of my dear and most beloved brother John I regard as a favor done to myself." This feeling of love and esteem for his brother remained and increased till the close of that brother's life, in 1877.

On July 30 of that year Dr. Ryerson received an affecting letter from his brother John, enclosing to him the manuscript of his "Reminiscences of Methodism," during his long and active life. These reminiscences were never published, however, but were among Dr. Ryerson's letters and manuscripts which came into my hands after his death in 1882. I handed them over to Rev. John Ryerson's widow and daughter.

In regard to them, he said: "What I have written is entirely from memory. In speaking about many things I had to do with, of course I had to speak a good deal about myself, but I was writing for the public, not for you; and if any of the facts I have referred to will be of any use to you in your essay, I shall be glad. That use, however, can be made without mentioning my name, which I have dreaded to see in print anywhere. By prayer, reading, reflection, and God's grace helping a poor worm, I have so far overcome the natural pride of my evil nature, as to be content, and sometimes happy, in my position of nothingness. My circumstances give strength to these feelings of contentment. My age and growing weakness show me that I am come very near the margin of my poor life, and unfavorable symptoms, from time to time, strongly remind me that, with me at least, 'in the midst of life we are in death.' I do not, however, deprecate, nor pray deliverance from, sudden death. My prayer is that of Charles Wesley's:

"'In age and feebleness extreme,
Who can a sinful worm redeem?
Jesus, my only help thou art,
Strength of my failing, flesh and heart;
Oh! might I catch one smile from thee,
And drop into eternity.'

'Several years ago I read a poem, or part of one, written in old age by the celebrated English poetess, Mrs. Barbauld, whose sweet words I very frequently repeat. She says:

"'Life, we have been long together,
Through pleasant and through cloudy weather,
'Tis hard to part when friends are dear,
Perhaps 'twill cost a sigh, or tear.
Then steal away, give little warning,
Choose thine own time;
Say not "good night," but in some happier clime,
Bid me "good morning."'"

These words were almost prophetic, for within three months after they were written, Dr. Ryerson left Toronto for Simcoe to attend at the dying bed of his beloved brother. Immediately after his death, Dr. Ryerson wrote to me and said: "Nothing could have been more satisfactory than the last days of my dear brother; and it was a great comfort to him and all the family that I was with him for ten days before his departure."

I have given in the "story" of Dr. Ryerson's life, and in his own words, the particulars of the closing scenes of his brother's life. They are very touching and tender—one or two incidents particularly.

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It was a great pleasure to me to have Mr. Ryerson as a guest during the session of the first General Conference, at which Dr. Ryerson was elected president. He was a most pleasant and entertaining companion, and many an evening he delighted us all with graphic incidents of his ministerial life, and of his visit to the mission stations of the Hudson's Bay many years before. All the brothers have now "gone home"; but none of them exercised so profound, so practical, and so lasting an influence on the Methodism and its institutions in Ontario of to-day as did the two Ryersons, who were among my choicest friends, and whose reminiscences I have briefly recalled in this sketch. I may add here that it was a great satisfaction to me to have had the venerable William Case as a guest at my house during the time that he prepared for publication his noted Jubilee sermon, and at his request furnished him with many facts recorded by him in that sermon.

Toronto.